“Blessed by Grace, Rewarded by Faithfulness” (Matthew 5:1–12)

1. A faithful church member died and went to heaven. When he arrived, St. Peter showed him around. There were beautiful gardens, wonderful music, and a magnificent banquet. The man was delighted. Then he asked, "St. Peter, do you have church committees in heaven?" St. Peter answered, "No, we don't." The man looked relieved. "No Finance Committee?" "No." "No Trustees meetings?" "No." "No Nominations Committee?" "No." The man smiled broadly. "Wonderful! Now I know I'm really in heaven!" We all know that serving the church sometimes requires patience, sacrifice, and many meetings! But, today, we will have Church/Charge Conference this afternoon. As long as we live, we must serve the church faithfully.

2. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus goes up a mountain, sits down, and begins teaching his disciples. He says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (v. 3) “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”(v.4) “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.: (v.5) This word sounds strange when we compare them with the values of our society. Our world often says, "Blessed are the wealthy, because they can buy whatever they want." "Blessed are the powerful, because they can control others." "Blessed are the successful, because everyone admires them." But Jesus offers a completely different understanding of blessedness. Jesus does not say that wealth, power, or worldly success determines our worth before God. Instead, Jesus calls blessed those who recognize their spiritual poverty, those who mourn, those who are humble, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Why? Because God's blessings are not something we earn through our achievements. They are gifts of God's grace.

Consider the first Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Being poor in spirit does not mean having low self-esteem or thinking that we are worthless. It means recognizing that we cannot save ourselves through our own goodness. We depend entirely upon God's mercy and grace. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, emphasized that salvation begins with God's grace. Before we even recognize our need for God, God's prevenient grace is already working in our lives. God's justifying grace forgives our sins and restores our relationship with God. God's sanctifying grace continues transforming our hearts and lives so that we may grow in holiness and love. In other words, our Christian journey begins with grace, continues through grace, and reaches its fulfillment through grace. We do not become saints because we have lived perfect lives. We become saints because God's grace calls us, forgives us, transforms us, and makes us holy. This is especially important on All Saints’ Sunday. When we remember our departed loved ones, we do not claim that they were perfect people. They had weaknesses, made mistakes, and sometimes struggled with their faith, just as we do. But God's grace was greater than their weaknesses. And God's love was stronger than death. That is the wonderful promise of our Christian faith.

One day, a pastor died and went to heaven. When he arrived at the Pearly Gates, he met St. Peter, who was standing there with a big book. The pastor proudly said, “I have been a faithful pastor for forty years! I preached every Sunday, taught Bible studies, visited the sick, baptized children, performed weddings, and served God's church all my life!” But St. Peter kept turning the pages and said, “Pastor, I have some good news and some bad news.” The pastor became nervous. “What is the good news?” St. Peter answered, “The good news is that your name is written in the Book of Life!” The pastor smiled. “Wonderful! And what is the bad news?” St. Peter replied, “Well, according to your record, you made quite a few mistakes during your ministry!” The pastor was shocked. “What mistakes?” St. Peter said, “Sometimes your sermons were too long. Sometimes you lost your patience with church members. Sometimes you complained about committee meetings. And sometimes, you even fell asleep during your own prayers!” The pastor lowered his head. Then he asked, “St. Peter, after all these years of

serving God, do you mean I haven't earned my way into heaven?" St. Peter smiled and said, "Pastor, nobody earns their way into heaven. Even pastors get here by God's grace!" The pastor breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God! Then I can enter heaven?" St. Peter answered, "Of course! Welcome home!" We can enter heaven by the equity of God's grace.

3. The second truth of the Beatitudes is that God's grace changes the way we live. Jesus continues: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." (v. 7) "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (v. 8) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (v. 9) Notice that Jesus does not simply describe what Christians should believe. He describes how Christians should live. A blessed Christian life is characterized by mercy, purity of heart, humility, righteousness, and peacemaking. These qualities are not merely religious ideas. They must become visible through our daily actions. Faith is not simply what we confess to with our lips. Faith must be expressed through our lives. John Wesley strongly emphasized this connection between faith and good work. He taught that genuine faith produces love for God and love for our neighbors. Good works do not purchase our salvation, but they are the natural fruit of God's grace working within us.

Think about the faithful saints we remember today. Most of them were not famous people. Their names did not appear in history books. They did not receive national awards or public recognition. But they faithfully served God in ordinary ways. Some taught Sunday School for many years. Some sang in the church choir. Some prepared meals for church gatherings. Some visited the sick and comforted grieving families. Some served on church committees, maintained the church building, or supported mission ministries. Others quietly prayed for their families, neighbors, and congregation. Their service may have seemed small in the eyes of the world, but it was precious in the eyes of God. Sometimes we think that serving God requires doing something extraordinary. But Jesus teaches us that faithfulness is often demonstrated through ordinary acts of love. Each ministry is an opportunity to put our faith into action. And every act of faithful service matters to God. We are not saved by our good works, but we are saved by grace for a life of good works.

4. However, God's blessings do not guarantee an easy life. Jesus says: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (v. 10) These words remind us that even faithful Christians experience sorrow, suffering, disappointment, and loss. Sometimes we mistakenly believe that if we are faithful to God, everything in our lives should go smoothly. We may think that faithful Christians should always enjoy good health, financial security, successful relationships, and peaceful circumstances. But Jesus never promised a life without difficulties. Instead, he promised God's presence and faithfulness during difficulties.

On All Saints' Sunday, we especially remember those who suffered before completing their earthly journeys. Some endured long illnesses. Some experienced loneliness or financial hardship. Some struggled with family problems. Others faced painful losses and unexpected tragedies. Yet many continued trusting God through their difficulties. However, Jesus concludes the Beatitudes with a remarkable promise: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." (v.12) Throughout our earthly lives, we work, serve, sacrifice, and sometimes suffer for the sake of Christ. Jesus promises that our faithful lives and service are never forgotten by God. The reward Jesus promises is the fulfillment of God's grace—the joy of belonging completely to God and sharing in God's eternal kingdom. Thanks be to God for the saints who have gone before us, for the grace that sustains us today, and for the eternal glory that awaits us all in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.